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ABSTRACT

A familiar and effective way to provide classroom practice of foreign language skills in a meaningful context is role-playing. One variation, spontaneous group role-playing, offers a bridge between textbook dialogues and real-world dialogues. Especially appropriate for beginning and intermediate students, simultaneous group role-playing is a simulation of real-life activities in which students participate in large groups without rehearsal. This activity is intended as the culminating activity for a unit of study that has included drill and practice of specific vocabulary and structural items. Within the inherently loose structure that allows for creativity and improvisation, the activity also contains controls that direct students to speak about familiar topics, using known grammatical structures. These controls are provided by role cards that briefly outline the group situation, the individual role, and the conversations that students must initiate. The teacher-designed cards can be adapted to almost any textbook and accommodate varying levels of proficiency. After some initial surprise, students generally find such activities both engaging and challenging. A series of cards are presented and procedures for their use are explained. Suggestions for creation of cards are made. (MSE)

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FROM TEXT TO CONTEXT:
Spontaneous Group Role Playing

Patti Marinelli

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From Text to Context:
Spontaneous Group Role Playing

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Among the awesome tasks which face us as language teachers is helping our students to bridge the gap between what they learn in their textbooks and what they must do to perform successfully in real-world communication. We are all too familiar with the student who can recite verb conjugations or execute pattern drills with ease but who cannot fit those puzzling pieces into the larger communicative picture. This problem and the ever-growing trend towards use of oral proficiency examinations make it increasingly important for us to find ways for students to practice their language skills in a meaningful context. One familiar yet effective way to allow for such practice is role-playing. The variation described herein—spontaneous group role-playing—can provide the bridge between textbook dialogues and real-world dialogues.

Especially appropriate for beginning and intermediate-level students, simultaneous group role-playing is a simulation of real-life activities in which students participate without rehearsal and in large groups, encompassing the entire class at the same time. It is meant to be the culminating activity for a unit of study which has included drill and practice of specific vocabulary and structural items. While providing inherently a rather loose structure which allows for creativity and improvisation, the activity is also designed with controls which direct the students into speaking about familiar topics and using known grammatical structures. These "controls" are provided by role-cards which briefly outline the group situation, the individual role, and the conversations which students must initiate. These teacher-designed cards can be adapted to almost any textbook and can accommodate varying levels of proficiency. After some initial surprise, students generally find such simulation activities both engaging and challenging, yet manageable, since the situations mirror previously studied material.

The following example will demonstrate how the cards are designed and used. As stated previously, the textbook provides the springboard for the simulation activity; in this case, we will focus upon a dialogue (see

Figure 1) taken from Jarvis and Lebredo's *Spanish for Communication Workbook*.[1] This dialogue introduces essential vocabulary and structures which students would need in order to deal with crew members of a plane and, to some extent, with other would-be passengers. After having practiced thoroughly the vocabulary and grammar of the chapter, perhaps in the course of a week or so, the students would be called upon to simulate being aboard a flight to Panama—some students would perform the roles of crew members, others would be passengers.

The cards in Figures 2 and 3 sketch out the roles of the crew members. By comparing the cards to the dialogue, one can see that the students are directed to initiate conversations or to make announcements that are very similar to those found in the dialogues. Thus, while small details are changed to discourage outright memorization, the students are guided into performing within the limited range of their studies. At the same time, since the responses to their conversational initiatives cannot be completely anticipated, the students must then pursue their conversations by drawing upon their knowledge of the current and previous chapters.

The role cards for the various passengers in Figures 4 and 5 illustrate two other novel and practical features of the cards—the incorporation of functional-notional type practice and the planned use of review. First, in their dealings with the crew, the passengers make requests, get information, and complain; these and other facets of the functional-notional approach can be easily incorporated into the cards, as the teacher desires. Second, in their conversations with each other, passengers 3 and 4 are told to make small talk about themselves, while passengers 5 and 6 are to plan their travels together. In both cases, the conversational topics have been selected because they will force the students to use both vocabulary and grammatical structures from earlier chapters of the same text.

The cards for passengers 3 and 4 also demonstrate how spontaneous conversations can be "planted". These two passengers would be assigned to sit in adjacent seats, although it is assumed that the two are "strangers". During the course of their conversation, they would then discover an "incredible coincidence"—in this case, a common interest in Argentina. When this bit of information surfaces, the students will have found a new source of conversation—and the topic will have arisen much like such topics do in real life.

After studying how the cards fit together, one can visualize how the entire simulation activity unfolds. Classroom desks have been rearranged

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[1]From *Spanish for Communication Workbook* by Ana C. Jarvis and Raquel Lebredo. Copyright (c) 1980 by D. C. Heath and Company. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

¡A Buenos Aires![1]

Marta sube al avión y la azafata la lleva a su asiento, que está al lado de la ventanilla. Va a ser un vuelo largo, y Marta piensa: "Afortunadamente traigo una buena novela. Puedo terminarla durante el viaje."

AZAFATA —Vamos a despegar dentro de unos minutos. Favor de abrocharse los cinturones y no fumar.

MARTA —(*A Raúl Pena, su compañero de asiento*) ¿Sabe usted cuánto tiempo dura el vuelo?

RAUL —No sé . . . unas quince horas . . .

MARTA —Supongo que van a pasar alguna película.

RAUL —Probablemente . . .

LA VOZ DEL CAPITAN —Bienvenidos al vuelo trescientos cuatro con destino a Buenos Aires. Vamos a volar a una altura de treinta mil pies. Llegamos a Panamá a las seis de la tarde . . .

Después de salir de Panamá, las azafatas y los sobrecargos sirven la cena.

SOBRECARGO —(*A RAUL*) Perdón, señor. ¿Es usted vegetariano o come carne?

RAUL —Yo como cualquier cosa.

SOBRECARGO —¿Y qué desea tomar? ¿Café, té o leche?

RAUL —Una taza de café, por favor.

SOBRECARGO —(*A MARTA*) ¿Y usted, señorita?

MARTA —Jugo de naranja o de tomate, por favor.

La azafata trae las bandejas y las pone en las mesitas de los asientos.

RAUL —¿Conoce usted Buenos Aires, señorita?

MARTA —No, no conozco Buenos Aires. Dicen que es la ciudad más hermosa de Latinoamérica.

RAUL —Es verdad. ¿Conoce usted a alguien en Buenos Aires?

MARTA —Sí, conozco a una muchacha de allí, pero no sé dónde vive.

RAUL —Estoy un poco mareado . . .

MARTA —Hay turbulencia. ¿Quiere una pastilla de Dramamina para el mareo?

RAUL —Sí, muchas gracias.

Horas después, el avión aterriza en el aeropuerto internacional de Buenos Aires. Después de pasar por la oficina de inmigración, Marta va a la aduana, donde hace cola.

INSPECTOR —(*A Marta*) ¿Cuáles son sus maletas, señorita? Debe abrirlas.

Marta las abre y el inspector las revisa.

INSPECTOR —¿Tiene algo que declarar?

MARTA —Una cámara fotográfica y una grabadora. Eso es todo.

INSPECTOR —Muy bien, señorita. Bienvenida a Buenos Aires.

Figure 1

CAPITAN

You are the pilot of a plane on a flight to Panama.

—Greet passengers as they board.

—Make announcements after take-off:

a. Welcome aboard.

b. Flight 408 to Panama.

c. Altitude of 35,000 ft.

d. Time of arrival 2:00 p.m.

e. One stop-over in Miami for ½ hr.

—During the flight:

a. Ask the stewardess for a cup of coffee.

b. Interrupt to say you are sorry but there is turbulence and everyone must fasten seatbelts.

—At the teacher's signal, announce that the plane is landing. Have everyone take his seat and fasten seatbelts.

SOBRECARGO 1

You are a flight attendant aboard a plane on a flight to Panama.

—Welcome passengers as they board.

—Direct each passenger to his seat.

—After the captain's announcements, announce that passengers in seats 8-14 may smoke.

—Also announce the location of the bathrooms.

—Offer food and beverages to passengers in seats 7-14 after all announcements have been made.

—Attend to any sick passengers with medication.

Figure 2

AZAFATA

You are a flight attendant on a plane going to Panama.

—Welcome passengers as they board.

—Direct passengers to their seats.

—After everyone is seated, announce that the plane is taking off. Have everyone stop smoking and fasten seatbelts.

—While the other attendants serve food, offer magazines and newpapers to the passengers.

—Attend to any special requests from the passengers.

SOBRECARGO 2

You are a flight attendant aboard a plane on a flight to Panama.

—Welcome passengers as they board.

—Direct passengers to their seats.

—Offer food and beverages to passengers in seats 1-6 after all announcements have been made.

—Attend to sick passengers and special requests.

PASAJERO/A 3

You are taking a flight to Panama. However, from Panama you plan to take another flight to Buenos Aires, Argentina, where you will visit relatives.

—In flight, make "small talk" with the passenger seated next to you: find out where he is from, what he does, etc.

—When beverages are offered, order orange juice and vodka.

—Get a magazine to read during the flight.

—Complain to the attendant that you want to smoke even though you are in a no-smoking section.

PASAJERO/A 4

You are taking a flight back to your home in Panama. (You are actually from Argentina but now live in Panama.)

—During the flight, make "small talk" with the passenger seated next to you: find out what he plans to do in Panama, talk about your old home in Buenos Aires, etc.

—When food is offered, get yourself a meal. Also, ask for a glass of water.

—Ask the flight attendant if there will be a movie.

—Ask the flight attendant where the bathroom is.

Figure 4

PASAJERO/A 5

You are travelling with a friend to Panama.

—During the flight, discuss with your friend plans for when you arrive: talk about hotels, museums you want to see, excursions you could take, etc.

—When food is offered, get a cup of coffee with cream and sugar.

—Get a newspaper to read.

—During the flight you become ill! Ask your friend for some medicine.

PASAJERO/A 6

You and a friend are aboard a flight to Panama, where you will be travelling together.

—During the flight, discuss your travel plans with your friend: talk about the kind of hotel you want, the places you want to visit, etc.

—When food is offered, get something to eat.

—If your friend gets sick, offer Dramamine. Get some water from the flight attendant.

—Ask the flight attendant what time you will arrive in Panama.

Figure 5

into airplane aisles and rows of seats and each student has been assigned a role-card. The "crew" stands waiting at the door of the plane as the "passengers" file aboard. Announcements are made, the plane takes off, conversations start, food is served, magazines are distributed—a fairly sophisticated scene, especially considering that college students can handle such a situation with little groping after only seven or eight weeks of daily language instruction.

Of course, not all spontaneous group role-playing activities need be so elaborate; many situations—even for large classes—can be successfully planned and executed with only two to four cards. Furthermore, simulation activities can be designed to accommodate texts with mini-dialogue formats or, with a little more planning, texts without dialogues.

The beginning high school text *Nuestros amigos, Spanish I*[2] serves as the basis for the next example, but the proposed simulation activity could be modified to accommodate almost any beginning text which covers similar material in the early chapters. The key is to create a situation in which students will synthesize most of the materials already presented. A little brain-storming would produce a number of situations in which people gather to discuss families, classes, and so on. One possibility is to have students imagine that they are studying in a Spanish-speaking country; as they meet new friends before class, they exchange information about themselves, their classes and professors, and their families.

A quick perusal of the role-card for this activity (Figure 6) reveals several differences in format. First, the directions call for less-structured conversational interactions; the students mingle freely with one another rather than with pre-assigned partners, as they did in the airplane simulation. Second, the students help create their roles more directly by completing the blanks provided on one side of the card. This "skeleton card" is a great time-saving device; the teacher needs to develop only one card, but because of student personalization, that card can serve a large number of people and still provide for varied interactions. Skeleton cards are most useful whenever the activity requires a large number of different characters or personalities who all have the same essential role.

The next example, also drawn from *Nuestros amigos*, allows us to consider another type of role-grouping and to examine more closely how review can be incorporated into simulation activities. The mini-dialogues of Chapter 7 all focus on restaurants and food; the present tense verb forms of *gustar* and *querer* are also introduced. Given these topics, students could perform in no more natural or practical a simulation than that of being in a

[2]*Nuestros amigos, Spanish I*, ed. Jorge García-Rodríguez (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979).

"CREATE-AN-IDENTITY"

Me llamo _____.
Soy de _____.
Tengo _____ años.
En mi familia hay _____ personas.
Tengo _____ hermanos; se llaman _____.
Tengo _____ clases. Son:
1) _____ a las _____
con el profesor _____.
El es _____ y _____.
2) _____ a las _____
con la profesora _____.
Ella es _____ y _____.
3) _____ a las _____.
con el profesor _____.
El es _____ y _____.
Esta tarde voy a _____.
Mi número de telèfono es _____.

ESTUDIANTE

You are in Mexico City as an exchange student. Before class begins on the second day, you are meeting some new classmates.

—Introduce yourself to someone and find out the other person's name.

—Ask where he is from.

—Ask if he has brothers and sisters.

—Make conversation about classes: ask what classes he is taking, what time they meet, what the teachers are like.

—Make plans to do something together after classes OR plan to call each other to make plans for the evening.

—Say good-bye, then go meet someone new.

Figure 6

restaurant. For this activity, desks could be arranged into "tables"; some students would become waiters; others, customers. Menus collected from travels abroad could be passed out to help lend authenticity to the situation.

The role cards for this restaurant simulation (Figures 7 and 8) demonstrate how the old and the new can be naturally blended together. As the simulation unfolds, the students will be practicing their newly-learned restaurant and food vocabulary; even some of the new grammar points, the use of *gustar* and *querer*, have been "slipped" into the conversational directives. At the same time, the proposed table-talk has a more familiar ring to it—the friends are once again exchanging information about families, teachers, and classes and are thereby reviewing essential vocabulary and grammar from the previous six chapters.

The patterning of interactions in the restaurant simulation varies a bit from the two we have examined previously. Ideally, cards would be distributed to allow for one waiter from every two or three tables of customers. In this way, there would be sufficient time between dealings with the waiter for the customers to chat with one another. This subdivision of the class into smaller clusters also means that fewer cards need to be developed; the three customer cards given here could be used at each of the tables needed to accommodate the class since there is no interaction planned between customers at different tables. Like skeleton cards, these cluster arrangements help reduce the teacher's work without sacrificing the quality of the activity. Clusters are most effective for situations in which interactions normally take place among small groups of people (ranging from two to six), as in *tertulias*, family discussion groups, in a hospital or doctor's office, at a police station or in a courtroom.

One of the principal advantages to using conversational directives is that the role-cards can be tailor-made to suit the level of the class. In this way, similar themes can be adapted and re-used at various levels and still remain fresh and challenging. The restaurant simulation we have just examined, for example, could be re-structured for more advanced students as in Figures 9 and 10. These cards, coordinated to the dialogue in Chapter 20 of Jarvis and Lebredo's *Spanish for Communication Workbook*, call for a much more sophisticated and intricate conversation revolving around an engagement celebration.

Flexibility, we have seen, is the hallmark of spontaneous group role-playing activities. Since teachers can design the role-cards to reflect their objectives, text, level, and class size, the possibilities are endless. Nevertheless, to ensure a successful simulation activity one should bear in mind three essential points that have been illustrated in the preceeding examples. First, the key element of the cards is the conversational directive, which must be based on previously studied material; it is this feature which allows even

CAMARERO/A

You are a waiter/waitress in a restaurant in Mexico City.

—Greet customers as they sit down.

—Ask if they want to see a menu.

—Write down each person's order.

—Ask what each wants to drink. (You're out of Coke so offer substitutes.

—Repeat this procedure at each table you are waiting on. Then "serve" the food.

—Ask if anyone wants dessert; mention the house specialty.

—Bring the bill to the table when your customers request it.

ESTUDIANTE I

You are in a restaurant with an old friend *and* a new classmate.

—Get a menu from the waiter/waitress.

—Order a main and side dish. Ask for a Coke.

—While you are waiting for service/ food, make conversation with your new classmate. Ask where he is from, inquire about his family, his classes at school.

—Compare your food with your friends' food; ask if they like this restaurant.

—Order something for dessert.

Figure 7

ESTUDIANTE 2

You are in a restaurant with an old friend *and* a new classmate.

—After you get a menu, ask the waiter/waitress if the enchiladas are good. Then order a main dish.

—Make "table talk" with your new friend; compare your class schedules and teachers.

—Order dessert. Ask your friends if they are ordering dessert, too.

—Offer to pay the bill for everyone.

—Ask your friends if they want to go to a movie tonight. Mention what is playing.

ESTUDIANTE 3

You are new in town. You are in a restaurant with two new friends from school.

—After you get the menu, order a sandwich and a side dish.

—Tell your new friends about yourself and find out about *their* families.

—Ask who their chemistry teacher is; find out what he is like.

—Ask for your friends' phone numbers and write them down.

YOLANDA

You and your fiancè Miguel are out to dinner with some friends. You are celebrating your engagement and want to break the good news to your friends.

—Order a complete meal from the menu including a meat dish.

—When you get your food, complain to the waiter that the meat is too rare.

—After Miguel breaks the news, fill in with details about the wedding—when and where it will be, your parents' reaction to the news. Also, ask your friend to be in the wedding as "dama de honor".

—Later on, ask the group what they want to do after dinner; make suggestions, such as a walk by the beach, a movie, a club, dancing, etc.

MIGUEL

You and your fiancèe Yolanda are out to dinner with some friends. You are celebrating your engagement and want to break the good news to them.

—Call the waiter over for a menu.

—Ask your friends if they want white or red wine. Then order wine and a meal for yourself.

—While you wait for service/food, tell your friends about your approaching marriage.

—If the topic of marriage dies down, ask your friends about their plans for the summer (possible trips, etc.).

—As you eat, comment on your food, ask Yolanda if she likes hers.

—Discuss with the group how much of a tip should be left.

Figure 9

SUSANA

You are going out to eat with some good friends. Miguel and Yolanda say that they have good news they want to tell you over dinner.

—Tell everyone you have eaten in this restaurant before. Recommend some good dishes.

—Order a complete meal. Mention to the waiter that your fork is dirty and that you need another one.

—Compliment Yolanda on her pretty clothes.

—Ask your friends what the good news is; after they tell you, express surprise and delight and ask for details.

—Participate in any other conversations that arise—mention that you are planning a trip to Europe this summer.

—Propose a toast to Miguel and Yolanda.

CARLOS/CARLOTA

You are in a nice restaurant with some friends. Of special interest is that Miguel and Yolanda want to tell you some good news over dinner.

—Comment on the music in the restaurant.

—Order a complete meal.

—When you receive the food, complain to the waiter that he has brought the wrong vegetables.

—After Yolanda and Miguel tell you their news, ask when they decided, how they met, if their parents know the news.

—Order champagne for a toast.

—If the topic of conversation changes, mention your travel plans to go to Puerto Rico to visit relatives.

—"Fight" with Miguel over who will pay the bill.

—Make suggestions for after-dinner plans.

Figure 10

beginning students to perform in life-like situations with little hesitation and floundering. Second, these conversational directives must be carefully coordinated among the various roles to provide for a smooth conversational flow; to accomplish this, one must keep in mind all the possible characters with whom any given student may interact. This coordination is especially crucial when more than two people will engage in conversation at the same time. Finally, the number and distribution of roles must be planned so that each student has a partner or group with whom he can converse at all times. For example, in a "shopping" simulation one might plan conversations only between clerks and individual shoppers; in that case, one would allow for one clerk for every shopper so that no one would be left without a partner. In the airplane simulation, one would plan for an even number of passengers to allow for a similar sort of conversational pairing; but additionally, one would need to plan on one crew member for every four or five passengers, both to keep the crew members occupied and to allow time for passenger-to-passenger interaction.

While the careful construction of the role-cards is the most crucial element to the success of spontaneous group role-playing, it is also important to lay the groundwork for the simulations with preparatory activities. Many of the exercises and practices commonly suggested in our textbooks can provide excellent preparation with little or no adaptation needed. Whenever possible, it is helpful to have students "rehearse" throughout a unit the bits and pieces which will come together as a simulation later. For example, if students will be participating in a simulation of shopping for clothing, they can profit from a drill in which they ask and give prices and colors for various articles or in which they ask and tell where the articles can be found. Another useful technique, especially for practicing thematic vocabulary, is the interview. For this practice, the teacher can provide a list of questions related to the topic of study (shopping, eating out, etc.) or the class can generate the questions as a group. Then, in pairs, the students use these questions to interview each other about their personal preferences and experiences related to that topic. Tying in the reinforcement of a writing practice, one could conclude the interview by having each student use the questions as a guide to write a composition. A third helpful activity is to have small groups of students prepare and perform brief skits related to the topic of study. One can either allow the students free creative rein to develop the skits or suggest problematical situations from which they might draw: a clerk attempting to pressure a reluctant customer into a purchase, an indecisive shopper trying the patience of a diligent clerk, a mother and daughter arguing over a purchase, etc. Finally, an excellent device which provides a *written* "dress-rehearsal" for the simulations is the dialogue completion (Figure 11).

DE COMPRAS

Marcos está en una tienda de ropa para caballeros.

Vendedor: Buenos tardes. ¿En qué puedo servirle?

Marcos: (1)

Vendedor: Muy bien. ¿Qué talla usa Ud.?

Marcos: (2)

Vendedor: ¿Y qué color prefiere?

Marcos: (3)

Vendedor: Lo siento. No hay en ese color. ¿Le gusta èste?

Marcos: (4)

Vendedor: Sólo 50 pesos. Es una ganga. El probador está allí.

Marcos: (5)

Vendedor: ¿Necesita algo más?

Marcos: (6)

Vendedor: ¿Sabe Ud. qué talla usa?

Marcos: (7) (He doesn't know, so he describes or compares the person to someone else in the store.)

Vendedor: ¡Ah! Entonces es esta talla.

Marcos: (8)

Vendedor: ¿Cómo desea pagar? ¿Con tarjeta de crèdito?

Marcos: (9)

Vendedor: Aquí tiene sus paquetes. Muchas gracias. Adiós.

Marcos: (10)

Figure 11

Completions give the students an opportunity to think through a simulation before they actually have to perform in it. They can also be used as part of a written test once the unit of study is completed.

When all the preparation and planning has been completed and the simulation is under way, teachers may initially feel disconcerted or at a loss as the students mill about and converse all at the same time. In fact, the students themselves are often taken aback at first, both because they may be unaccustomed to functioning in such a loosely-structured environment and because they are amazed to find themselves handling the situations so well. Of course, it may be necessary at times for the teacher to intervene to keep the activity flowing smoothly. A few students may need to be reminded to speak in the target language. In some activities, especially when students must interact successively with a number of different partners, the teacher must direct the traffic flow by matching up a student to a new partner if he has already finished with one or by exchanging role-cards among students who have completed their assigned tasks in advance of the majority of the class. For many activities, however, there is time to wander from group to group and listen in on the conversations. Although certainly one is bound to hear errors, it is exciting to discover that most students can communicate effectively in these controlled situations and have at least started their way across that bridge to real-life, uncontrolled, communicative situations.